



**GUIDELINES
FOR
INTERPRETERS
AT MASS
AND THE
CELEBRATION
OF THE
SACRAMENTS**

Diocese of Lansing

MASSES WITH THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Ideally, members of the Deaf community most fully participate in a Mass signed by the presider and other liturgical ministers. The richness of Deaf culture and the nuance of sign language are often absent in interpreted Masses. However, at Masses which have both hearing and deaf persons in the assembly, providing a sign-language interpreter is essential for inclusivity.

THE INTERPRETER

Interpreting is a distinct role, requiring an interpreter's complete attention. It is not possible for a person both to participate and interpret at an event. Thus, one should not expect a parent, relative or friend of the deaf person to serve as an interpreter. A third party allows all to participate fully. Interpreters for the Deaf are skilled professionals, aware of their role as an agent of communication, yet never presuming to be unofficial spokespersons for the Deaf community.

Selecting a competent interpreter is essential. Competence includes fluency in sign language and in the language spoken (English, Spanish, etc.), adherence to the Code of Ethics, and knowledge of Catholic and religious vocabulary and signs. Knowledge of Catholic belief and practice is desirable, and may be a necessity in some situations (e.g. a theological talk or catechetical conference). An interpreter is expected to use the mode of communication preferred by the Deaf person(s), i.e., American Sign Language (ASL), Contact Signing, English Signing, etc. Deaf persons have the right to an interpreter whom they understand clearly and with whom they are comfortable.

When hiring interpreters regularly, it is ideal to work with the same interpreter or group of interpreters each time.

COMPENSATION FOR THE INTERPRETER

Professional qualified interpreters have a right to compensation. Monetary compensation is the responsibility of the sponsoring parish, agency, or institution, not the deaf individual, the family or guardians. Compensation rates vary from place to place and with the interpreter's level of certification and experience. Some interpreters prefer to volunteer, but that is the interpreters's choice, not the sponsor's. Do not expect all interpreters to volunteer because one or more has volunteered in the past.

THE LOCATION OF THE INTERPRETER

Good visibility is crucial. Ideally, interpreter and deaf persons are close to each other. Sight lines need to be clear and unobstructed. Reserved seating for deaf persons in front usually accomplishes this. Good lighting – bright, but not glaring – is essential. Ideally, an interpreter works in front of a neutral background: i.e., plain, single dull or darker color, without decorations or persons moving about. Interpreters generally wear clothing that contrast their skin tone and little jewelry to make seeing their signs easier.

Some situations, such as working with a deaf-blind individual, require one-on-one interpreting. In such cases, the interpreter and participant require nearness, i.e., sitting across from or next to one another.

Deaf persons must focus on the interpreter for everything that is spoken. For Deaf persons to be able to see – and therefore participate – in the action of the liturgy, it is necessary for the interpreter be as close as possible to that action. The interpreter should be in line of sight with the altar and stand near the Deaf Community. It is *never* appropriate to place the deaf congregation and the interpreter “on the side” or out of sight of the liturgy.

THE INTERPRETER AND LITURGY

Interpreting at Mass or any liturgical celebration is a special role in service to the assembly. Ordinarily, an interpreter facilitates communication so that the parties involved have equal access to information. In a prayer setting, an interpreter's role is not merely to convey information, but to facilitate deaf people's "full and active participation" in the liturgy. (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* #14) Accordingly, the interpreter is best understood as one of the liturgical ministers, with a proper role and function, as are the lector, song leader, servers and Eucharistic ministers.

At the majority of liturgies, a single interpreter works throughout. However, the nature and duration of the service may require more than one interpreter.

When a deaf person proclaims the readings in sign language, the interpreters proclaim the reading orally ("voices the readings").

LITURGY PREPARATION

The interpreter receives copy of all texts in advance. These include the readings, petitions, lyrics for all songs, commentary and, if possible, the homily. Translations of any foreign language text (e.g., Latin or Spanish) should be made available. An interpreter may wish to have a music stand during the service for quick reference to a text.

Some song lyrics are difficult to translate into sign language. Ideally, a representative of the deaf community or an interpreter can be part of the liturgy preparations.

The interpreter must be informed of changes in texts or music, as soon as possible. It is also helpful to inform an interpreter of any special elements in the service, such as procession. Interpreters are expected to be available to sign for any pre-service announcements or rehearsals.

Interpreters may wear colors that coordinate with the liturgical season or feast, but this is not necessary. Most interpreters are trained to wear simple, dark, unpatterned clothing so that the movements of their hands might be more visible. Wearing a gown or choir robe (as liturgical ministers do in some parishes) may be problematic for an interpreter because of the long, flowing sleeves.

THE ASSEMBLY: DEAF AND HEARING

Especially when a parish begins to provide interpreted Masses on a regular basis, it is appropriate to give some orientation to the hearing congregation. This includes basic information about Deaf people and sign language, the role of an interpreter in allowing Deaf persons to participate fully in the liturgy, practical information about which Mass(es) will be interpreted, and where the deaf members of the congregation will be seated, etc. It can be particularly effective when a deaf person can address the congregation and explain what interpreting the liturgy means to him/her. It may also be helpful to ask the regular interpreter to provide input for or give one of these orientations. Most hearing persons find that the interpreting actually adds to the beauty and prayerfulness of a liturgy. Even those few who initially find interpreting distracting usually become accustomed within a few weeks.

Many congregations welcome the opportunity to learn the correct sign language for common responses and prayers at Mass, witnessing to the solidarity of the worshiping assembly.



RESOURCES

Policy for Working with Sign Language Interpreters in Catholic Religious Settings ..

©1995 by the National Catholic Office for the Deaf,
814 Thayer Avenue, Suite 209, Silver Spring, MD
20910-4500.

Link to Communication: Using an Interpreter for the Deaf, Catholic Deaf Center, Orange, California.

Guidelines for Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities. U. S. Bishops, June 1995, especially, nn. 1-7, 24, 38.

For more information on welcoming
persons with disabilities and persons who are Deaf
into the liturgical life of the parish, please contact :

Office of Ministry to Persons with Disabilities

517-342-2500

or the

Office of Worship

517-342-2480

**Most Reverend Carl F. Mengeling
Bishop of Lansing
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